

# Through a Limiting Lens: Comparing Student, Parent, and Teacher Perspectives of African American Boys' Support for School

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## Abstract

Three qualitative case studies of elementary school African American boys demonstrate differing perspectives of the school-related support that students experience. Three boys, their teachers, and their parents/guardians identified various individuals as supportive in the boys' schooling. These individuals included co-residential family members, other family, and unrelated significant adults. Interviewees reported various forms of support, including encouraging talk, instrumental help, and non-school activities that serve to develop positive personal qualities. However, the cases suggest that individuals can frequently differ in their recognition of school-related support, dependent upon the lenses through which they view it. In particular, limited notions of "family" and involvement can constrain the support that school staff identifies. These findings have significant implications for schools' promotion of school-related support and for home-school relations.

Key Words: African American boys, Black male students, elementary schools, parents, teachers, perspectives, supports, relatives, family, case study, education, involvement, engagement, home-school relationships, youth development

## Introduction

"All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention." —Rudolf Arnheim

Research in recent years has demonstrated that the involvement of parents and family in the educational process holds some promise in closing persistent achievement gaps (Epstein & Dauber, 1991; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Muller, 1995). However, there is still much to learn about the nature and diversity of school-related support that students experience from their families. Studies have generally defined and operationalized “involvement” from the perspective of the schools and have focused involvement efforts on meeting the needs of school staff (e.g., insuring homework completion; Graue & Oen, 2009). To date, research still explains little about how families, and low-income and racial-ethnic minority families in particular, view the support they provide for their children’s education and how this compares to institutionalized notions of parent involvement. Even less attention has been paid to how children perceive and experience school-related support that is provided outside of the school.

Without a broader understanding of the school-related support that children experience and that families provide, schools may be limited in their ability to encourage and enhance positive involvement. In this paper, I compare student, teacher, and parent perspectives of the school-related support three African American boys experience. Through these case studies I seek to provide insight into the variety of forms and sources of support that students experience and into how such support can be differently perceived by students, parents/guardians, and school staff. I draw implications from the data on the importance of the schools’ perceptions to their capacity to promote positive involvement and to general family–school relations.

## **Parent Involvement**

Widespread attention to research in parent involvement in schooling began over three decades ago, and studies have examined involvement in settings from early childhood (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1974; Castro, Bryan, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004) to higher education (e.g., Perna & Titus, 2005). Researchers have examined differences in parent involvement and its influence by socioeconomic status (Clark, 1983; Lareau, 1989) and race and ethnicity (e.g., Cooper, 2003; Jeynes, 2003, 2007; Lopez & Rodriguez, 1995) and have described various ways in which parents’ involvement takes shape, both in home and school settings (e.g., Shumow & Miller, 2001). In a model frequently referenced in current research as well as in school policies and programs, Epstein (1995; Epstein et al., 2008) identified six forms of school-related involvement: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. Some research has also noted how factors such as parents’ perceptions of the school climate (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown,

& Lynn, 2003) and the practices of teachers and schools (Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski, & Apostoleris, 1997; Kim, 2009) influence the nature and extent of parents' involvement.

An emphasis on parent involvement as students' foremost experience of school-related support, however, inherently limits our thinking of support, in regards to who provides it and the forms it takes. Extant studies of parent involvement have not fully addressed the increasing diversity of family composition in the United States. While some schools and researchers have acknowledged that grandparents raise many children (e.g., Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998), there remains a tendency to focus on individual households and heads of households (i.e., parents or guardians). Typically, schools have not engaged well with families who did not fit visions of the nuclear, "Standard North American Family" (Smith, 1993), and many children today are members of families that involve extended and social families or may be transgenerational and transresidential, especially among lower income and racial-ethnic minority groups (Scanzoni, 2001). Families that do not fit the structural models presumed by schools may not be effectively reached and engaged by schools in ways that could support their involvement with children.

Several have also argued that the institutional culture and practices of schools often reflect middle-class patterns of family life, particularly in their definitions of and expectations for parent involvement (Davies, 1993; Graue & Oen, 2009). Recent studies suggest that parents' views of involvement may differ in significant ways from that of school staff, especially among families that are non-white and/or not middle class. In a community-based research effort, Fogle and Jones (2006) found that low-income African American parents were concerned that school staff would misconstrue their lack of attendance in formal school activities as disinterest. By contrast, they felt they were very involved with their students at home, assisting with homework and setting and reinforcing high expectations. Reflecting alternative notions of parent involvement, Cooper (2003, 2007) found that African American mothers sometimes viewed school choice and direct opposition to the school in advocacy of their children as important aspects of support. Considering that schools are less likely to encourage the involvement of families they view as less supportive or cooperative (Graue, 2005; Grolnick et al., 1997), these studies suggest schools can miss important opportunities to tap into and enhance existing support.

Examining the various ways families support students is also valuable for the simple fact that educational researchers still are not certain of the forms of support that are most influential to student success. Meta-analyses by Jeynes (2003, 2007) and Fan and Chen (2001) have found a generally positive effect of parents' involvement in their children's schooling, but effect sizes varied

greatly when specific forms of involvement were considered (e.g., parental expectations) or with different measures of academic achievement (e.g., grades or standardized test scores). Jeynes (2005) even found negative associations between some forms of parent involvement and academic outcomes, such as frequent school contact or high levels of homework oversight. With increased understanding of the variety of ways students feel supported by their families and why, scholars may sort out these questions. Researchers and practitioners may learn of the importance of context, including student characteristics, family factors, and school and community influences. The field may also develop an increased understanding of the value students and families attach to particular supportive actions and of the complex motivations that drive involvement. With enhanced understanding of these forms of support and the value and motivations behind them, practitioners may better capitalize on the resources families offer to support students' success.

## **Theoretical Orientation**

This study builds from a growing body of critical studies of parent involvement that examine processes implicit to home-school relations that advantage some families and disadvantage others (e.g., Brantlinger, 2003; de Carvalho, 2001; Delpit, 1995; Graue & Oen, 2009; Horvat, Weininger, & Lareau, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999; Trainor, 2008). Several of these scholars draw upon the theoretical works of Bourdieu (1986) to assert that the involvement of family members in school is influenced by much more than one's interest and motivation to be involved. The economic, social, and cultural capital that families variably have access to enables some families to engage with the school more often or more effectively than others (Brantlinger, 2003; Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Perhaps more importantly, the involvement that some families demonstrate may match more closely the involvement that schools expect than do others. Trainor (2008) argued that family involvement constitutes social and cultural capital of value dependent upon the determinations of the dominant group (i.e., school staff). As such, school staff mediates the power of families' capital in schools, accepting some forms of capital and rejecting others, and encouraging some behaviors and inhibiting others. From a critical standpoint, the perceptions of school staff of families and how they support their children can be an important mediating factor between families' efforts and their actual results. This theoretical perspective guided this investigation and influenced how I analyzed and interpreted the case studies.

## Research Questions and Method

Qualitative case studies involve the use of multiple qualitative research tools to explore in-depth a case or cases of interest (Stake, 2005). While various qualitative methods and theoretical frameworks may be applied by the researcher, qualitative case studies typically involve triangulation of data, focus on experiential knowledge as well as contextual influences, and give attention to the activities within the case. A multiple or collective case study, like this one, examines a set of related cases to investigate a phenomenon, population, or condition of interest. Individual cases may be similar or dissimilar, and redundant or variable, but are chosen intentionally for the valuable insight the case is believed to offer to the set and to a yet larger collection of cases or theorizing. Nevertheless, the researcher paying close attention to the particularity of individual cases is essential to be able to understand how cases relate to the greater phenomenon; as such, the researcher gathers data on various aspects of the case, including data of the context and data from multiple informants.

The three cases discussed here are drawn from an ongoing effort to understand and connect the educational support networks of African American students to their schools in a small, urban school district in the Midwest. Within these efforts, our research team (myself and the lead investigator in the larger project) examined the content and structure of African American boys' social support networks to understand from whom, in what forms, and in which contexts they received school-related support. We have also examined associations between support network characteristics and academic and other school-related outcomes.

Like other critical qualitative researchers (Foley & Valenzuela, 2005), we sought to prioritize the voices of those who have been historically marginalized and "spoken for" to gain new insights from their personal sense-making of their experiences. As such, we interviewed the boys directly to develop ego-centered social support maps of the school-related support they recognized. In this protocol, we asked them to identify the actual support they experienced through response to an open-ended question, "Who helps you be a good student?" For each person identified, we followed up with the question, "What does this person do that helps you be a good student?" To gain more descriptive details, we then probed the student to recount in a narrative an experience when this individual helped him be a successful student (e.g., "Tell me about a time when this person helped you with school."). In analyzing these data, we found that the boys recognized various individuals and forms of school-related support (Lewis & Hilgendorf, 2009). They reported receiving support from adults and peers in their family and kinship networks, often spanning multiple

households and sometimes even cities. They reported receiving instrumental, informational, and emotional forms of support from these individuals, some that reflect traditional notions of parent involvement, but they also identified many other forms of support, such as being assigned chores to develop responsibility or “playing school” with a cousin to practice school-like scenarios.

The present case studies contribute to our knowledge of school-related support and parent involvement by examining how low-income African American boys, their parents/guardians, and teachers commonly and differently perceive support for school success. In these case studies, my purpose is to answer the research question: “How do African American boys, their families, and their teachers share and differ in their understanding of the school-related support the boys experience?”

To answer this question, the parents/guardians of African American boys in one elementary school were contacted to gain additional information regarding the families’ perceptions of the boys’ school-related support. By the time these case studies were initiated, I had spent a full school year at the school, conducting interviews with students and their teachers, observing school activities, and serving as a volunteer in the boys’ classrooms as part of the larger research effort described above. Because we had previously secured consent for their children’s participation in our research, many parents/guardians were already familiar with our work, and when attending school events I had additional opportunities to build rapport with families. With the assistance of the school principal, I contacted parents/guardians and invited them to participate in an interview. I invited them to include in the interview anyone else who would be knowledgeable of each boy’s school experiences and his support. In one case discussed here, this led to a joint interview with a mother and great-grandmother who shared guardianship of the boy. For the other two cases, the parent for whom the school had provided contact information chose to complete the interview individually.

For this analysis, three cases were selected for their capacity to reflect the variety of sources and forms of school-related support the boys experienced and to reflect the patterns in which different people (students, parents/guardians, teachers) typically perceived that support.<sup>1</sup> The cases are representative of the range of family compositions boys experienced and of the range of supports identified. The three cases are also demonstrative of the varying degrees of agreement between students, parents/guardians, and teachers of a boy’s support, from little to high agreement. Like the majority of the African American boys in the study, the three boys all lived in a low-income urban area, recounted both positive and negative experiences of school, and participated in various activities in and out of school.

Interviews with the boys, parents/guardians, and teachers were all semi-structured and allowed for participants to introduce views of school-related support not reflected in current research (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). The boys and the teachers were interviewed in a private location at the school, such as an empty classroom, during a time in the school day when it would not be disruptive to their learning or teaching. Parents/guardians were given the opportunity to choose the time and location of interviews to accommodate their preferences. Two parents chose to be interviewed in their own homes, and the mother and great-grandmother pair chose to be interviewed at the school. Interviews lasted from 40 minutes (for one of the boys) to 160 minutes (for one of the parents). To easily draw comparisons, parents/guardians and teachers were asked to respond to two central questions similar to those asked of the boys: "Who helps him be a good student?" and "What does this person do?" Likewise, they were probed to recount in a narrative style particular situations in which mentioned individuals offered the boy support. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and detailed notes and descriptive memos provided opportunities for data triangulation and supported the analysis (Stake, 2005).

In these case studies, I analyzed the interview data with open coding in the NVIVO qualitative data analysis program (Bazeley & Richards, 2000), beginning with broad attention to *who* provided support and in *what* forms. These basic areas of attention soon led to codes of relational roles (e.g., immediate family, extended family, mentor/teacher) and locations (e.g., shared household, household nearby city, community institution), and general types of support (e.g., instrumental support with homework, emotional care). Such coding was useful as I examined general patterns in the identification of support across all respondents and between particular groups of respondents (e.g., parents/guardians vs. teachers) in role-ordered matrices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To better compare perspectives within cases, I then used the coded data to craft ego-centered social support maps for each boy. By adding on information of the identified support of each respondent like a layer onto these maps, I could identify where identifications of support aligned and where they differed. As a White female of a middle-class background, I sought to redress possible biases and cultural misunderstandings in a number of careful ways (Merriam, 1998; Schensul et al., 1999). Throughout the research process I engaged in debriefing and analysis sessions with members of the multicultural research team and a peer group of qualitative researchers. I also reserved portions of the field journal for reflective questioning and exploration.

## Data and Findings

The boys, parents/guardians, and teachers identified a number of individuals who provided the boys with various forms of school-related support. These individuals included the parents/guardians themselves, but also grandparents, siblings, staff of youth programs, and other adults, such as church members or family friends. They also identified a variety of forms of support, including encouraging talk, homework help, efforts to promote positive dispositions and habits (e.g., assigning chores), providing for basic needs, and serving as role models. Sometimes the boys, parents/guardians, and teachers agreed in their identification of school-related support, but often they did not. In general, teachers identified individuals with whom they had personal contact (e.g., the parent/guardian), and they discussed activities directly related to school objectives, like reviewing students' homework and report cards and responding to school communication. While the parents/guardians and boys also identified these forms of support, they equally identified activities that were not school-specific but were still seen as supportive, such as participating in sports in order to develop responsibility and teamwork.

While no participant group (boy–parent/guardian–teacher) entirely shared a perspective of the boy's support, in some cases the divergences were greater and with potentially greater implications. In one case, the participants generally shared a perspective of the support offered to the student, even though it may not have been a traditional perspective. The boy, his parent, and his teacher seemed to share a broader view of support, like a *wide-angle lens*, that could capture support within the immediate household and also beyond. In the other two cases, a narrower view of support, like a *normal lens*, seemed to exclude from view the support offered by individuals outside a traditional sense of "family," especially for the teachers. Data from these cases suggest such limited conceptions of support can have significant implications for students and for families' relations with the school. (Note: All personal names used are pseudonyms.)

### Through a Wide-Angle Lens: James

James was in the fourth grade and lived with his mother and father and two older siblings. His family had lived in the community for multiple generations, and James often spent time with extended family members. James was a high achiever in class and often appeared to compete with other students to finish tasks the most quickly and correctly. He had many friends, and though he had not had disciplinary issues, he was known by school staff to occasionally "act up." James's mother, Catrina, participated in an interview for the study. James's

teacher, Ms. Jackson, participated in the research. Ms. Jackson was a middle-aged African American woman with children and a grandchild in other district schools. She grew up in a working-class family in a large urban area in the region. At the time of this study, she had taught at the school for 14 years.

James identified his mother, father, and two grandmothers as sources of support and spoke of how these individuals talked with him about school, providing encouragement and conveying their expectations, and helped him with homework when he needed it. About his mother, he said, "She go on the internet, like go on a webpage to help me....Stuff that was gonna be on the test."

His mother, Catrina, similarly recognized support provided by herself and her husband. She said,

...my number one priority is his education. That's the first thing I ask him from the time he goes to school to the time he comes home. You know, homework, homework....And what he don't know, I'll help him sit down, if he say he don't understand it or may have problems, we sit down, and we figure it out.

She also spoke of many other forms of support they provided, such as building responsibility by assigning responsibilities in the home; discipline, rewards, and punishments; monitoring James's social life; and responding to his requests for support, as in when he asked her to "quiz" his math knowledge. Catrina also recognized support provided by adults in a local youth program, especially men who she believed served as good role models for James.

Ms. Jackson similarly identified support from various individuals within James's immediate family and beyond it. She seemed to partially base her perspective of support on personal contacts with the family. The teacher said she knew they supported him "because they ask me about how he's doing or what's going on at school, if I see them...inside school sometimes, maybe at the grocery store....I was just talking to his grandpa yesterday...at a basketball function." Ms. Jackson stated that her own son participated in this basketball program, so such interactions with James's family, including members of his extended family, happened on a fairly regular basis. She indicated that these encounters were primarily casual and friendly, but the topic of school and James's progress often was discussed as well.

### **Limits of a Normal Lens: Isaiah and Tyreese**

As compared to James, the perspectives of the support of Isaiah and Tyreese diverged more significantly, sometimes to an extent that effectively omitted or even discredited the support identified by others. In both of their cases, information from the interviews indicated that these divergences had, or had the potential for, negative consequences.

*Isaiah*

Isaiah was in the fifth grade and lived with his father, his (step)mother<sup>2</sup> (whom he and Isaiah's father refer to as simply "mom"), two sisters, and a brother. Isaiah was known among the school staff for being well-behaved and a hard worker, but quiet. In small groups working with friends, he could be more vocal and would step up as a leader. Isaiah's father, Clarence, participated in the study. Isaiah's teacher, Ms. Warren, a young White woman in her first professional year of teaching, also participated in the research. She grew up in a middle-class family in a town less than 30 miles away, but she said she felt she was still getting to know the city and school community.

Isaiah identified his father, his (step)mother, the mother of two friends, and his brother as sources of school-related support. He spoke most of receiving support in the forms of conversations about school, advice and academic help, and monitoring of his school progress. He also identified as supportive the general care and concern his (step)mother and his friends' mother demonstrated for him and ways in which they taught him to be "caring, fair, and trustworthy." Isaiah also spoke at length of the life lessons his (step)mother offered him. He recounted how she shared with him a work experience and told of the lessons she hoped he would take from it:

...like what did she do wrong, and she admitted that she did it. And she got a week off of work 'cause she told...her boss...the truth....It told me to tell the truth and not blame other people.

Clarence also identified ways in which he supported Isaiah's school success. Clarence said he gave Isaiah frequent messages of encouragement—to persist and to work hard—insisting that Isaiah "can't fail" if he tried. Clarence said, "You know he's trying for APs [advanced proficient] every time he takes a test...and I'm going like, 'Yes! Yes! Keep that attitude, that's what I'd be happy for.'" He also said he made efforts to "push him to be independent," for example, by requiring that he wash the dishes he used. Clarence also reported supporting him by involving him in activities that he believed could promote positive personal qualities, like sports, and by securing academic assistance that he could not provide himself, like tutoring through the community center.

Although Clarence identified many ways he supported his son, he singled out his wife/Isaiah's (step)mother, Kendra, as the origin of much of the support Isaiah received. He described her as "very involved" at school and with the children at home. Further, he credited her for much of his own involvement:

I do not call up there and say, "Hey, [you] need somebody for something?" But she do....The only thing I do is show up. "You know you got to be at the parent conference tomorrow." "Okay, I'll be there."

Clarence also believed Kendra's school and community involvement made her "a big role model" for Isaiah and that the discipline she maintained promoted other positive qualities, like dealing with disappointment. He believed Isaiah's brother in high school also served as a role model to Isaiah by setting a standard for achievement and creating a positive sense of sibling rivalry.

Ms. Warren continuously identified Isaiah's father, Clarence, as his most significant source of support. While she felt that the family, including Isaiah's (step)mother and his older siblings, stressed the importance of education and made a point to come to school events together, she credited Clarence most for Isaiah's support. She said he maintained communication with the school, secured additional academic help for Isaiah, and was generally reliable and present at the school. She said that amongst the school staff "everyone knows dad." However, she felt Clarence could still do more to support Isaiah's schooling and expressed concern of an overemphasis on sports that she perceived, remarking that "I would rather have dad support education right now, rather than athletics."

Ms. Warren also spoke of two older siblings, a brother and a sister, who she believed helped Isaiah with homework and served as positive role models. However, of Isaiah's (step)mother, she said, "I have never met (her)," and in contrast to the breadth and significance of support that Isaiah and Clarence ascribed to Kendra, Ms. Warren could not specify how she might support Isaiah. Suggesting a particular notion of "the family" and family members' roles, Ms. Warren frequently qualified her references to Kendra as "not biological mom" and related this to a lack of support she saw. For example, Ms. Warren said, "All our after school events dad will be here, not mom. That's why I'm not sure if [she]'s biological mom." To Ms. Warren, it seemed, the role of step-parent would presume a lesser degree of interest and involvement in a student and his education.

These perceptions appeared to have consequences for how the school and the family interacted. Because of the strong support Ms. Warren recognized in Isaiah's father, she said she usually pursued contact with the family through him. The portrayal from Isaiah and Clarence of his (step)mother's support, however, suggested that the more efficient and effective way to communicate may have been through contact with Kendra.

### *Tyreese*

Tyreese was also in Ms. Jackson's fourth-grade class and was good friends with James. Tyreese said he lived sometimes with his great-grandmother and grandparents in one house and at other times with his mother and younger sister in a house nearby. His father and his father's other family lived in another

state, and Tyreese said he saw him primarily in the summers. His family regularly attended a local church, and Tyreese said he saw school friends, family friends, and other acquaintances there. He was known to be energetic and well-liked by classmates and teachers. His mother, Tanya, and great-grandmother, Betty (who also raised Tanya), were interviewed together for the study.

Tyreese identified a broad network of people who provided him with school-related support, including his great-grandmother, his mother, staff members from the local Boys & Girls Club and from other youth programs, and his father, even though he lived several hours away. He also spoke of a variety of forms of support, like taking care of his basic needs, expressing high expectations for school, and establishing rewards and punishments. Tyreese spoke excitedly about a male staff member at a youth program and how he helped him with his homework, taught him sports skills, and offered encouragement and advice:

He telled me about tips, do not be scared or nothing...to “reach your dreams,” and...“never, never give up what you’re doing.”...I never give up what I’m doing,...and “do what the teacher tell you,” and he said that to me, too.

As one reason for identifying this staff member, Tyreese spoke of emotional closeness with him, saying, “I think he like my, my third dad, ‘cause I like him very much.” With his own father, even though he lived far away, Tyreese recalled receiving homework help over the phone, especially in math: “‘Cause I call him, to see what is the problem, and he’ll wait for five seconds, then bam! He got the answer. I don’t know how he do that.”

While Tanya, Betty, and Ms. Jackson all recognized the support provided by his mother and great-grandmother, they did not identify the support of the male staff member or of Tyreese’s father. For Ms. Jackson, identification of support for any boy, for these three cases and others in the larger study, was limited to immediate or extended family, and thus excluded individuals such as this male staff member. Additionally, the physical location of individuals seemed to be an important criterion to Ms. Jackson in determining support, and more specifically, whether they shared the household or lived nearby and were readily accessible. Although she was not accurate in her knowledge of the particulars of Tyreese’s living situation, her justification for the support she identified for him appeared to hinge on family members’ locations and accessibility:

Probably, his mom and his [great-]grandmother. He lives with his [great-]grandmother, he doesn’t live with his mom, so, but his mom would help him if he needed help....I think he sees his mother on the weekend or at night, I don’t know. But I know he sees her on a regular basis.

For a boy like James, whose immediate family shared his home and extended family lived nearby, such consideration of physical location adequately captured the support available to him. For a boy like Tyreese, however, this kind of lens would exclude the support of his father because he lived far away.

Tanya and Betty also identified other individuals as sources of support to Tyreese, such as friends of the family and church members, yet they seemed constrained by their personal observations and interactions. They spoke generally of youth programs as positive environments for Tyreese, yet seemed unaware of the specific relationships he had developed and the support he experienced from staff members. In fact, a lack of awareness of Tyreese's relationship with the male staff member may have contributed to a severance from his support. When I interviewed Tanya and Betty a few months after Tyreese's interview, they spoke about the youth program and their decision to withdraw Tyreese from it:

But this program out here, that was how he got so far behind in lessons, they was just letting him get away with anything, so we had to pull him out of it...supposed to make sure that they get their lessons, and they wasn't doing it.

Removed from the program for academic concerns, Tyreese no longer had any contact with the male staff member he identified as "like my third dad." If Tanya and Betty—both of whom had expressed concern for the lack of male role models in Tyreese's life—had known of this significant relationship to Tyreese, another decision may have been made that could have maintained his contact with the man. In this case, the limiting aspect of the lens could be the singularity of it; the addition of another lens, obtained through direct conversation with the boy about his experiences, could broaden the scope of support identified and subsequently maintained.

Ms. Jackson, Tanya, and Betty did not mention Tyreese's father or the support he provided. In addition to his physical distance, the fact that he was away and not involved in Tyreese's daily care may have led Ms. Jackson to presume his limited involvement and/or interest in his son's schooling. Like Ms. Warren's apparent uncertainty around Isaiah's (step)mother and her biological or "not biological" status, Ms. Jackson's consideration of Tyreese's father may have centered around normalized notions of family and family members' roles.

## Discussion

These case studies collectively suggest that when perspectives of a student's school-related support are shared, certain advantages may be leveraged, and when they are not, potentially negative consequences may result. When school

staff or family members recognize school-related support, they may be more likely to tap those sources to support a student in ongoing but perhaps also novel ways. For example, Ms. Warren, knowing already that Clarence took Isaiah to the a community center to get extra tutoring in math, later recommended that Clarence enroll him in the school's math support program.

Another advantage of shared perspectives of a student's support may relate to simple acknowledgement of those supporters' efforts. Acknowledging supporters may reinforce and strengthen their support by promoting feelings of appreciation and accomplishment (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Supportive individuals may also come to view the school more favorably, and mutual acknowledgement and appreciation may spur desires to work better across home and school to support students. In fact, Clarence spoke of a feeling of reciprocity with the school, saying, "They helped me, I'll help you. And as a matter of fact, I'll go a little bit farther, if I know you're willing to help me." Aligned and reciprocal support may strengthen the support provided from both home and school, with enhanced impacts for students.

Just as there may be certain advantages when perspectives of school-related support are shared, however, there may be particular disadvantages when they differ. Schools are less likely to tap into sources of support that they do not know exist. For example, Ms. Warren did not reach out to Kendra to support Isaiah's schooling, because she did not believe Kendra was supportive and/or interested as his "not biological mom." Furthermore, individuals who do not know of sources of support may inadvertently create hurdles to important support for students. In the example of Tyreese, this risk was clear, as he reported receiving significant amounts of encouragement and emotional care from the male staff member at his youth program, yet unaware of this relationship and the support the man provided, his mother and great-grandmother removed him from the program. For a boy with purportedly little positive male interaction, this decision may have had unfortunate consequences.

Another consequence of differing perspectives of school-related support may be an underappreciation or lack of recognition for support. In contrast to the positive reinforcement and positive home-school relations that may result from recognition of supporters, frustration, discouragement, and strained home-school relations may result from its absence. While Isaiah's (step)mother was reported by both Clarence and Isaiah to provide various and extensive forms of support—and Clarence asserted that her efforts far outweighed his own—Ms. Warren did not believe she was much involved and heralded Clarence's support instead. Though beyond the scope of this study, it is interesting to consider how Isaiah's (step)mother may have reacted to Ms. Warren's statements. For many parents/guardians, such a misperception would likely result in

frustration, disappointment, or a strained relationship (Baker, 1997). Existing research demonstrates that parents, and parents of color and lower socioeconomic status in particular, often worry that schools misconstrue their lack of presence in the school as an indicator of disinterest and noninvolvement (Delpit, 1995; Fogle & Jones, 2006; Lareau, 1989). These studies further suggest that parents/guardians may then seek to further limit their level of interaction with school staff. Such a dynamic may weaken individuals' efforts to provide support due to feelings of frustration or incompetence and threaten any motivation to cooperate with schools to provide support.

In the cases of Isaiah and Tyreese, the support provided by individuals outside of more traditional notions of the "family" seemed often to be viewed differently. Like a lens calibrated on a particular sense of "normal," teachers appeared to have blind spots to the school-related support of individuals outside a conventional family structure. For Isaiah, perspectives of the support of Kendra, a stepparent, diverged most; for Tyreese, the support of his father, a nonresidential parent, diverged significantly as well. Together, this suggests that status as a parent with less conventional relationships with children may considerably influence others' perceptions of that person's school involvement. Smith (1993) argues that how a family is judged to fit an ideology of the "Standard North American Family" can positively and negatively influence that family's interactions with societal institutions, including schools. Within this ideology, families who deviate from the paradigmatic composition of the family and the set of roles ascribed to family members are assumed to be less functional. As indicators of deviance from this normative family paradigm, stepparents, nonresidential parents, and other nonconventional relations may be assumed to engage with children's schooling in deviant, absent, or otherwise less functional ways. Past research has found that preservice educators do have lower expectations of the quality and quantity of the school involvement of such groups (Graue & Brown, 2003), and these cases suggest in-service teachers may carry over such thinking to their practice. Ms. Jackson's emphasis on the location of individuals, and thus their presumed accessibility or inaccessibility to the child, may suggest another indicator of a family's fit to this paradigm. Individuals further beyond a conventional notion of family but who still provided important forms of support, such as the male staff member for Tyreese, were even less often recognized and appreciated.

Clear differences were also apparent in the forms of support participants identified. Such differences suggest that students, families, and schools may have distinct conceptualizations of support, and so even when these individuals talk together about support, miscommunication is possible. Additionally, students, families, and schools may vary in their valuations of different forms

of support. For example, the teachers generally emphasized the roles of parents/guardians in assisting students with homework and maintaining communication with the school, yet to the parents/guardians, these activities often took a backseat in their discussions to non-school-specific activities that they deemed important to the boys' school success, such as enacting rules and responsibilities in the home or involving the boys in extracurricular opportunities. Extant research of parent involvement has still to conclude the forms of involvement that have greater significance for students' school experiences, some stressing parents' volunteering and participation in at-school activities (e.g., Comer & Emmons, 2006), while others stress home-based behaviors, such as family talk about the school day, parental expectations about achievement, or even non-specific parental support and caring (e.g., Jeynes, 2003, 2007, 2010, 2011). Even if teachers are right to emphasize homework help and communication with the school for goals of academic achievement, focusing on such behaviors may have little impact on students and families if they do not see them as supportive or as important as their other supportive efforts (López, 2001).

While no participant in this study spoke explicitly of "race" or the families' African American background as a factor in school-related support or their determination of it, lenses of race-ethnicity and class may be highly influential in thinking about school-related support. This may especially be the case for school staff like Ms. Warren, whose racial-ethnic and class backgrounds differ from many of their students. Beliefs about race-ethnicity, along with socioeconomic class, gender, and other social identities, can associate with teachers' beliefs about families and parent involvement and influence teachers' interpretations, valuation, or even justification of families' behaviors (Graue & Brown, 2003; Horvat et al., 2003). Indeed, in several studies, school staff have conveyed beliefs in the limited capacity and efficacy of racial-ethnic minority parents to contribute to their children's education (Davies, 1993; Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Jones, & Reed, 2002; Hughes, Gleason, & Zhang, 2005). Further, educators may assume that families of color, and especially those of lower incomes, do not have the time, money, interest, energy, or skills to contribute to the school's efforts, and thus believe they are doing these families favors by not seeking their involvement (Grolnick et al., 1997; Kim, 2009). School staff members' beliefs about families of different racial-ethnic and class backgrounds can have a powerful influence on the school-related support they recognize, assume, and promote.

## Conclusion

From this in-depth examination of perspectives of African American boys' school-related support, there is reason to believe that support is not uniformly perceived by students, families, and schools alike. With research and practice that addresses the constraining effects of particular lenses of "family" and "parent involvement," researchers may come to better understand and utilize the variety of sources and forms of school-related support that students experience. With increased understanding of support as students and families define, experience, and value it, educators may marshal and further strengthen support to pursue goals that both schools and families highly value. Indeed, if educators and families can identify opportunities to collectively discuss support with students (e.g., through conferences, back to school nights, in-class writing activities), they may make relatively easy but significant steps towards better understanding and utilization of existing support. Additionally, increased understanding of the influences of notions of "family," the roles of family, and subtle associations between race-ethnicity and socioeconomic class in thinking about families may have significant implications for the preparation of teachers, such as concerted coursework around family variation and home-school relations. With increased understanding among teachers and researchers of the fruitful engagements of diverse families with their students, we may better enact home-school relationships that foster success for all families and students.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>While various members of the family could have provided valuable and interesting perspectives of the school-related support the boys experienced, I chose to target parents/guardians for two reasons: (1) As the primary and legal contacts of the school, parents/guardians could typically speak best of their students' and families' experiences with the school; and (2) as primary caregivers, parents/guardians were also positioned well to know of the boys' interactions with various individuals outside the school, to include family, friends, and community members.

<sup>2</sup>"(Step)mother" here is being used intentionally to convey the maternal relationship that Isaiah and Clarence perceive between she and Isaiah. Although she is not his biological mother, Isaiah and Clarence do not emphasize a different relationship.

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